

Some open-ended questions written for telephone or in-person surveys include possible response categories that are silently coded by the interviewer. The classification of possible responses, with a residual "other" category, tends to shorten the interview and improve comparability to responses across respondents. Example 5 provides an open-ended question with and without response classification.

Example 5: Open-Ended Questions

Q5.1 What kind of work do you normally do? That is, what is your job called?

_____ OCCUPATION

Q5.2 Now let's move on to some questions about health information. What would you say is your **most** important source of information about health care?

- a. Doctor 01
- b. Public Health Department 02
- c. Other clinic or health center 03
- d. Other people—family 04
- e. Other people—friends, acquaintance 05
- f. Newspapers 06
- g. Television 07
- h. Magazines 08
- i. Radio 09
- j. Other sources: SPECIFY _____ 10
- k. None 00
- l. DK/NA 99

Answers to open-ended questions without classification such as Q5.1 are recorded either verbatim or paraphrased by the interviewer, depending upon the nature of the question. Occupation is often asked in an open-ended question, with numeric coding conducted afterwards.

An open-ended question with classification is provided in Q5.2. The response categories allow interviewers to code volunteered responses without prompting respondents on possible sources of health information. In many cases respondents have never considered their sources of health information and some concentration is necessary to formulate a response. Respondents should never be prompted in such an open-ended question to aid them in formulating a response.

Close-ended questions provide the respondent with a list of possible answers from which to choose the best or in some cases multiple responses. The advantages of close-ended questions are that they are easier to answer, requiring much less concentration on the part of the respondent; easier to code, involving much less interviewer discretion in choosing the appropriate response category; and most importantly, the close-ended question provides comparable data across respondents.

In designing questionnaires, researchers should consider the demands being placed upon respondents. Open-ended questions requiring considerable concentration can tax respondents to the degree that they will either prematurely terminate the interview or hurriedly answer in order to complete the questionnaire. A mix of close-ended and open-ended questions can be used to limit demands on the respondent.

Ease in coding responses by the interviewer or respondent is an important consideration in questionnaire design. Pauses between questions, the result of lengthy recording of responses, increases the time required to complete the interview. Inexperienced interviewers are likely to encounter difficulty "fitting" responses to open-ended questions into available response categories.

Comparability across respondents is an important prerequisite to combining answers and calculating aggregate summary statistics. The use of open-ended questions with classification of responses does not fully eliminate the problem of comparability. Consider Q5.2 in which respondents are asked to recall sources of health information. To the degree that recollection, understanding, and articulation play a part in the respondent's formulation of an answer, comparability across individuals is hampered. Ideally, comparisons should be among respondents' actual source of information and not their recollection or understanding of the source.

There are two types of close-ended questions: ordered response and unordered response. Q6.1 is an example of an ordered-response question. In this type of question the possible responses fall in an order along a continuum of potential responses. The number of response categories in an ordered response question is dependent upon the goal of the question and the type of survey (i.e., mail, in-person, telephone). Mail and in-person surveys can use greater detail in the categories through the use of visual displays of the responses. Telephone surveys are limited by the respondent's memory of response options.